Consumer awareness of food's environmental impact is slowly growing

Food Dive

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Dive Brief:

- Consumer awareness about the climate impact of food choices is slowly growing, according to a new report from Kearney. Four out of five consumers have at least some knowledge of the environmental impacts of food, but about half of them say they don't always buy the most climate-friendly foods because they think they are too expensive. Many also don't want to transition to a vegetarian or vegan diet.
- More than a quarter of consumers — 27% — think about the environmental impact of food while at the grocery store. And 83% say they are willing to substitute another meat or plant protein for beef — which in general has a much larger carbon footprint — once a week.
- Most CPG and ingredient companies have detailed sustainability plans that address things like carbon footprint reduction, decreasing waste and transitioning to ingredients that are better for the environment. Other studies have found that labels informing consumers of sustainable practices make consumers more likely to purchase them.

Dive Insight:

Kearney's report coins a new term to describe people who choose what they eat with sustainability top of mind: Climavores. And, the study, which was drawn from a survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers last month and other statistical data, finds that the number of Climavores is slowly growing. In the last five years, Google searches for keywords about the carbon footprint of several areas of food have risen, according to Kearney's analysis. Searches on dairy's carbon footprint have increased by nearly a third, while those looking at beef have gone up 18%.

Younger consumers are more likely to be climate conscious, the study found. Those who are between 18 and 44 years old are up to twice as likely to consider the environmental impact of food choices. They are also the target demographic for many food companies: young adults with purchasing power and potentially with families.

Kearney predicts that by 2030, the majority of U.S. consumers' food choices will be climate focused. While this could be a result of global warming and other environmental issues, it could also come from more consumers knowing and caring about climate change. The report tries to set a roadmap for what that could mean for food brands today.

One of the more striking findings is that the popularity of plant-based eating for climate change seems to be waning. Out of the omnivores included in Kearney's survey, 38% said they were not at all likely to purchase plant-based

alternatives in the next 12 months — a decrease of 6 percentage points compared to a year prior. Only 19% said they were very likely to purchase these products, down from 31% in 2021.

A large chunk of consumers said unwillingness to adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet was their biggest impediment to making climate-centric food choices. About 40% of those who were unaware of the environmental impact of food said that was their top obstacle. Another quarter of those consumers said they felt alienated by plant-based alternatives and they wanted "real food."

But these beliefs also extended to those who are more aware of how food impacts the planet. A third of those who were somewhat aware of the sustainability aspect of food and 20% of those who were very aware also said they didn't want to be vegetarians or vegans. About 16% of both of those groups said they preferred "real food."

In order to get more consumers to want to eat plant-based, manufacturers need to convince consumers to move beyond negative perceptions. Alternative analogs are becoming more common on shelves, and proving that the products taste good and can satisfy consumers' hunger is important. Reaching price parity with traditional products could also make a big difference. Consumers are still chiefly concerned with a product's price, and they would be more likely to buy a plant-based option if the cost was the same — or even less.

Additionally, manufacturers should continue their work behind the scenes to decrease the environmental impacts of their products. Some of this comes from aspects that consumers can support with their purchases — including using more climate-friendly ingredient sourcing or fewer animal-derived ingredients. Manufacturers often call these aspects out on product packaging, which could influence 55% of consumers to make a purchase, according to a recent Fatitudes survey from Cargill.

Energy and water use in manufacturing plants and product transportation can also make a large difference in environmental footprints, but that's unknown to consumers. If manufacturers talk more about their efforts here, it could not only help their sales, but it may also boost consumers' awareness of food's connection to sustainability.

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